

[Review] The unspeakable failures of David Foster Wallace: language, identity, and resistance; David Foster Wallace: fiction and form

Article (Accepted Version)

Gurowich, Timothy (2017) [Review] The unspeakable failures of David Foster Wallace: language, identity, and resistance; David Foster Wallace: fiction and form. *Textual Practice*, 31 (5). pp. 1025-1032. ISSN 0950-236X

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/67567/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Tim Gurowich

Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), x+222pp, £88 (hbk)

David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), x+202pp, £88 (hbk)

Since his death in 2008, the work of David Foster Wallace has stood at the centre of a rapidly-accumulating field of popular and academic attention. The past two years alone have seen the release of a film (*The End of the Tour*, 2015) based on David Lipsky's account of a long interview with Wallace, the twentieth-anniversary reissue of *Infinite Jest*, widely considered to be Wallace's masterpiece, and, most recently, the establishment of an international society (and accompanying academic journal) dedicated to Wallace's work.¹ It is in the context of this thriving discussion that we must situate the arrival of two new monographs on Wallace: Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, and David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*. While each book carries an awareness of its position amidst existing critical writing, both critics nonetheless make claims to move this conversation in new directions, to interrogate and challenge what Hayes-Brady refers to as 'the range of ideas which have become doctrinal' (p. viii) in the reception of Wallace's work.

In Hayes-Brady's study, this intention to move beyond these 'doctrinal' lines of enquiry is made clear in her focus on the 'unspeakable failures' of Wallace's writing. To an extent, this attention to Wallace's failures chimes with the emergence of a number of dissenting voices amidst the acclaim of his work, seen perhaps most notably in Amy Hungerford's recent article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which she announced her 'refus[al] to continue reading or assigning the work of David Foster Wallace'.² In Hungerford's assessment, Wallace's failures ultimately outweigh his strengths: the popularity of his writing is the result of his celebrity, of a marketing machine that 'masks . . . the limited benefits of spending the time required to read his work'.³ While a far cry from this general dismissal, Hayes-Brady nonetheless shares with Hungerford a desire to shine a light on

Wallace's limitations and flaws, to escape what she refers to as the 'too-frequent tendency toward hagiographical, sui generis readings' (p. 12) of his work.

Rather than cite these failures as grounds for ignoring Wallace, however, Hayes-Brady instead positions failure as an unavoidable, and perhaps necessary, component of his writing. In her introduction, she asserts that the term 'failure' is 'carefully chosen', referring to a 'range of attributes' (p. 2): failure is in part characterised as a 'recurrent theme' (she notes that '*Infinite Jest* went under the working title of *A Failed Entertainment*' (p. 2)), but is equally used to refer to 'the many very real shortcomings in Wallace's writing' (p. 2). Most pertinent is the notion of failure as 'a lack of, and resistance to, completion' (p. 4), a form of failure which she positions at the centre of Wallace's fictional project. Hayes-Brady situates this resistance to closure in relation to Richard Rorty's description of the purpose of philosophy as an attempt to 'keep the conversation going'.⁴ She identifies a parallel drive towards continued (and thus unfinished) conversation in Wallace's work: his writing is 'dialogic rather than didactic' (p. 1), distinguished by its resistance to the 'closure' of univocal answers. This 'absence of closure' is figured as a kind of 'generative failure' (p. 2), one which informs almost every facet of Wallace's writing, from the 'myriad instances of failed communication' (p. 5) experienced by his characters, to the structural tendency of Wallace's texts to deny readers the 'closure' of coherent or conventional endings.

Even as she establishes this conception of 'generative failure', however, Hayes-Brady raises the question of whether Wallace's resistance to closure can really be regarded as a failure at all. Certainly, in its treatment of the ways in which Wallace's work 'fail[s] better' (in the terms laid out by Samuel Beckett), Hayes-Brady's book at times risks turning these ostensible failures into another kind of success.⁵ In her characterization of Wallace's 'commit[ment] to generative failure' as a means of realizing his 'redemptive ambition for literature' (p. 63), for example, Wallace's 'failures' are framed in an almost wholly positive way, a step on the way to an ultimately greater achievement. Even in these moments, however, Hayes-Brady herself remains attuned to the contradictions involved in the concept of 'better' failure. She notes that 'failure as it is seen here [. . .] is painful and discouraging each time. It is not a thing to be desired but a thing that cannot be avoided. While not a form of success, it is nevertheless inevitable and necessary' (p. 8). Far from a 'commodification of the concept

of failure as a new form of success' (p. 5)—as seen, for example, in the Silicon Valley mantra of 'failing fast and failing often'—Wallace's failures are treated as unavoidable, an end in themselves.⁶ Failure, then, becomes for Hayes-Brady a means of assessing Wallace's *oeuvre* in its entirety, a lens through which we can better perceive the messy contradictions, the weaknesses and strengths, of his work as a whole.

Hayes-Brady's investigation is structured along broadly thematic lines, exploring variously the diverse manifestations of failure within Wallace's writing. In this, she moves freely between texts, drawing examples from across his work in the development of a wide-ranging perspective on these key ideas. At times this panoramic approach can prove somewhat frustrating: Hayes-Brady's close-readings of individual texts, while insightful, can occasionally feel all-too brief. Despite these infrequent irritations, however, Hayes-Brady's approach ultimately holds its own rewards. In drawing together texts from across Wallace's career, Hayes-Brady is deft in identifying the recurring concerns which run, sometimes obsessively, throughout his writing. Within a discussion of *The Pale King*, for example, she notes the ways the unfinished work's 'consideration of civic virtue . . . circles back to Wallace's early writing on love, sacrifice, and the self in striking ways' (p. 202). She suggests that the more overtly political focus of Wallace's late work can be found in embryonic form in even his earliest writing, providing examples of the 'subtler iterations of civic engagement' (p. 202) within the stories of his 1989 collection *Girl with Curious Hair*. By tracing these lines of connection across Wallace's work, Hayes-Brady provides an insight into the shape and development of Wallace's career that a straightforward chronological survey would not. Furthermore, the book's thematic structure is effective in reorienting the critical perception of the shape and development of Wallace's work. Where existing criticism has perhaps tended to place primary focus on *Infinite Jest* as Wallace's 'very magnumest opus' (p. xiii), Hayes-Brady pays equal attention to Wallace's less-discussed texts—including the early fiction, short stories, and non-fiction essays—showing a desire to explore the rich, and sometimes chaotic, variety of his writing, and gesturing towards a critical practice which can provide a more nuanced understanding of Wallace's body of work as a coherent whole.

At various points within *The Unspeakable Failures*, Hayes-Brady takes up lines of enquiry familiar to Wallace scholarship. Her exploration of Wallace's relationship with philosophy, for

example, touches on subjects—such as the importance of Wittgenstein’s philosophy for Wallace, or his equivocal engagement with Derrida and deconstruction—which have been investigated extensively within existing critical work.⁷ While her return to these areas is consistently justified by the rigour and originality which she brings to her argument, Hayes-Brady’s study is at its most successful in the instances where it moves into less well-canvassed territory. Perhaps the book’s most significant contribution is found in its final chapter on ‘Gender, Difference, and the Body’ (p. 167). In focusing on questions of race and gender, Hayes-Brady addresses the ‘serious structural and political shortcomings in Wallace’s work’, shortcomings which have for the most part been addressed only in passing by other critics.⁸ At the start of her chapter, Hayes-Brady observes that Wallace’s ‘writing of both female characters and romantic relationships is patchy at best and enormously problematic at worst’, and goes on to suggest that a ‘similar pattern governs the appearance and exploration of issues of racial difference’ (p. 167). Even as she draws attention to these more concrete failures, Hayes-Brady does not present these problems as evidence for a general condemnation of Wallace: she acknowledges that, although ‘it would be simple to accuse Wallace of misogyny or racism (p. 168), these problematic aspects of his writing rather warrant closer critical attention in and of themselves.

Crucially, she suggests that these shortcomings are bound up with the same failure she has identified across Wallace’s body of work. While far from the generative failures found elsewhere, Wallace’s problematic portrayals of women and people of colour arise from a comparable failed attempt to connect with an external ‘other’, to use fiction to communicate beyond the boundaries of subjective experience. Surveying the ‘few female characters’ within Wallace’s narratives, she notes that ‘they are, almost exclusively, engaged in struggles to tell their own stories, recurrently working against narrative appropriation, either because they have difficulty with language or because someone else is trying to tell their story for them’ (p. 171). For Hayes-Brady, these flawed portrayals reflect a self-conscious concern over the inevitable limits of Wallace’s capacity as a writer. She suggests that Wallace was ‘overwhelmed by what he saw as the alterity of the female experience’ (p. 171), and that, in the recurring inaccessibility, silence, or absence of his female characters, his work exhibits a persistent and tortured awareness of his own failure.

In arguing this, Hayes-Brady does not attempt to apologise for or explain away the manifest problems of Wallace's work. She identifies even more significant shortcomings, for example, in Wallace's 'very limited' (167) engagement with issues of race, noting how few non-white characters there are within Wallace's narratives, and how, among these, so many speak 'in the kind of argot associated with stereotyped black characters' (p.71). Wallace's reflexive awareness of his own limitations does not resolve these failures: Hayes-Brady asserts that 'while Wallace repeatedly identifies the problematic gender and race relations in his work, etiology is not cure; identifying a problematic engagement with the nonwhite or nonmasculine does not constitute a solution to the problem' (p. 168). Hayes-Brady does not suggest that these shortcomings should be recuperated as instances of generative failure; rather, by situating this discussion alongside the various other, more positive failures she has identified, she suggests that these concrete failures form an integral aspect of Wallace's writing, and must be addressed as part of any attempt to make sense of the complexities and contradictions of his body of work. Indeed, this sense of Hayes-Brady broadening the parameters of the critical discussion surrounding Wallace ultimately carries throughout *The Unspeakable Failures*. By engaging in the same kind of open-ended enquiry, the resistance to totality, perfection, or closure, which she identifies in Wallace's writing, Hayes-Brady exhibits her own commitment to 'keeping the conversation going', to engendering a Rortian continued dialogue which invites a deeper understanding of the difficulties, ambiguities, and failures of Wallace's work.

This concerted effort to broaden the scope of 'Wallace studies' is equally evident in David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*. In Hering's case, this intent is seen in his focus on the Wallace archive, held in the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas in Austin, and containing manuscripts, letters, marginal notations in books, and 'drafts of all Wallace's fiction and non-fiction' (p. 9). In *Fiction and Form*, Hering offers the first sustained investigation of how these papers inform and illuminate Wallace's published writing, building an engagement with these materials into a wider exploration of the various formal strategies employed by Wallace in his work.⁹ Of course, this critical approach carries with a set of attendant hazards: Hering himself acknowledges the 'potential problems of intentionalism' (p. 12) that come with any attempt to use these papers to inform or explain the content of published texts, noting the 'danger of allowing critical agenda to

shape a reading of the materials' (p. 12). Through *Fiction and Form*, he strives to avoid these dangers: rather than using this archival material to furnish a univocal interpretation of Wallace's writing, Hering instead employs the notes and drafts in 'constructing a narrative of how earlier forms or registers are tried, rejected and torqued throughout Wallace's career', thus creating 'a genetic "map" of Wallace's composition' (p. 10).

Fiction and Form recalls *The Unspeakable Failures* in its own focus on the dialogic impulse at the heart of Wallace's literary project.¹⁰ This dialogism has been addressed previously by Adam Kelly, who suggests the extent to which Wallace 'address[es] a single question by thinking it through a plurality of languages, discourses, and dialogues'.¹¹ Hering builds on and revises this suggestion, arguing that Wallace's work is marked by 'a recurrent oscillation between narrative models of monologism and dialogism' (p. 7). Even as it strives to present a plurality of conflicting voices, Wallace's writing is always threatened by the presence of a monologic 'master discourse', identified by Hering as Wallace's self-conscious authorial presence within the texts themselves. For Hering, the reflexive attention which Wallace draws to his position as 'author' places an inevitable limit on the dialogic potential of his work. This tension—figured as a continued oscillating movement between the opposing poles of monologism and dialogism—underpins the various formal strategies explored throughout *Fiction and Form*. Of central significance to Hering is the idea that Wallace's dialogism is necessarily unfinished: he describes Wallace's work as 'both dialogic and *dialectic*', in that it 'continually presupposes a greater degree of dialogical engagement towards some (crucially undefined) future communicative end' (p. 7, emphasis in original). Once again, Wallace's writing is figured as a succession of failed attempts to reach the unachievable: in this emphasis on 'ongoing process' (p. 7) and inevitable disappointment, Hering, like Hayes-Brady, shows interest in exploring Wallace's flaws, inconsistencies, and failures.

Fiction and Form is organized into four extended chapters, the first three of which each address a different formal feature of Wallace's writing. As in *The Unspeakable Failures*, the broad scope of these thematically structured chapters (focusing variously on 'Vocality', 'Spatiality', and 'Visuality') is effective in identifying Wallace's recurring concerns. Unlike Hayes-Brady, however, Hering retains an emphasis on chronology: in each chapter, he follows the development of these

formal motifs across Wallace's career, progressing from the 1987 novel *The Broom of the System* to the 2004 collection *Oblivion*, the last work of fiction published in Wallace's lifetime.¹² While the successive tracing of this chronological outline carries the risk of repetition, Hering's approach is successful in providing a stronger impression of the way these formal strategies evolve over the course of Wallace's writing life. Hering himself articulates the efficacy of the book's structure, arguing that the 'analytical scope' of his extended chapters allow him to 'trace formal developments in Wallace's work at both macro- and micro- level, drawing out accord and conflict in form, and construct a map of the fiction as a developing system' (p. 4). Hering again conceives of the book's project in cartographical terms: across *Fiction and Form*, this work of 'mapping' is borne out in iterative steps, with each chapter providing a further layer of detail and depth to the assessment of Wallace's work.

In his first chapter on 'Vocality', for example, Hering traces the motif of ghosts and ghostly possession through Wallace's fiction, linking it with Wallace's concern with the uneasy presence of the writer's 'voice' or 'consciousness' within the text. Hering suggests that Wallace—informed by 'the question of authorial effacement' (p. 16) raised most famously by Barthes in 'The Death of the Author'—is interested in the 'spectral' quality of authorial presence, and the way this ghostly presence is felt in the dialogic relationship between author and reader. Moving chronologically through Wallace's work, Hering investigates the way this ghostly motif develops over Wallace's career. This development is framed as part of a larger movement from monologism to dialogism, a series of progressive, and often frustrated, attempts to achieve a greater dialogic engagement with the reader. In tracking the various permutations of this developing concern, Hering offers unprecedented insight into the nature of the advances and transformations which take place across Wallace's writing. Further examples of this simultaneously detailed and expansive interrogation occur in later chapters, from a discussion of Wallace's 'performative[ly] Midwestern' (p. 47) regionalism, and its relation to his increasingly ambivalent engagement with institutional structures, to an exploration of the recurring motif of mirrors and reflection in Wallace's fiction, and the ways in which this reflective model gradually develops into a potentially redemptive (albeit still limited) model of dialogic 'refraction',

inviting the possibility of ‘looking *through*’ (p. 99) the apparently narcissistic reflective surfaces of Wallace’s narratives.

Hering’s bold intention to ‘creat[e] a genetic chronology of the entire body of Wallace’s fiction’ (p. 13) is answered most comprehensively in the book’s last chapter, which focuses on Wallace’s posthumously-published 2011 novel *The Pale King*. As an unfinished work—the published version of which was collated from Wallace’s notes and drafts by his editor Michael Pietsch after the author’s suicide—*The Pale King* is a text which is impossible to consider in isolation from the circumstances of its composition and assembly. Hering acknowledges the difficulty involved in any attempt to assess *The Pale King* in formal terms: borrowing terminology from Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*, he suggests that, even as the novel exists as a ‘completed action’ (p. 124)—an organized, published text—it also presents ‘a world of potentiality’ to the reader in the ‘sprawling collection of compositional materials held in Wallace’s archive’, leaving open the question of ‘how, if at all, the form of Wallace’s third novel can be systematized’ (p. 125).¹³

In response to this critical difficulty, Hering begins his fourth chapter by focusing on this mass of archival material, utilizing it to ‘outline a detailed genetic history of the novel’s composition’ (p. 125). Crucial to this outline is the sense of Hering considering the entire latter part of Wallace’s career as bound up with the continued ‘macro project’ (p. 126) of *The Pale King*’s gestation. Hering invites a critical reassessment of Wallace’s post-*Infinite Jest* fiction in terms of ‘one huge linear “discrete project” that shed or engendered other projects during its process’ (p. 126): approached in these terms, Wallace’s late-period works are figured both as series of ‘co-existing and co-evolving literary projects’, and also as part of his larger struggle to ‘surpass *Infinite Jest*’ (p. 126) and finish his third novel. *The Pale King*, then, is characterized by Hering as a work which is at once ‘summative’ and ‘paralytic’ (p. 127), staging both a culmination of, and a conflict between, the various prior formal concerns addressed throughout *Fiction and Form*. In tracing the ‘complex and troubled compositional history’ of *The Pale King*, Hering achieves his intention to ‘eliminat[e] of some more speculative and inexact approaches to the text’s form’ (p. 139) common to previous critical responses to the novel. Through his genetic ‘map’ of its various manifestations, he offers a clearer perspective

on the shape and structure of *The Pale King*, providing a foundation for a more informed critical understanding of this unfinished text.

Beyond this, Hering's mapping also forms the basis for the development of his own argument. At the end of the book, Hering utilizes his compositional history of *The Pale King* in exploring how Wallace's central 'motifs of vocality, spatiality and visuality were still evolving in this late period' (p. 139), finding evidence of the way these concerns were developed—and, sometimes, problematised—over the course of the novel's composition. Hering's book finishes with an acknowledgment of the essential unknowability of *The Pale King*: 'Ultimately *The Pale King* will never completely cohere, however much we read it, but as its lengthy and often convoluted composition reveals, it attempts to substantially address and advance the formal configurations of vocality, spatiality and visuality that characterize Wallace's fiction' (p. 62). In *Fiction and Form*, Hering does not claim to offer a comprehensive thesis or explication of *The Pale King*, or indeed of Wallace's wider *oeuvre*. Rather, by tracing these recurring formal motifs and concerns across Wallace's work—both published and unpublished—he offers an insight into the evolutions and mutations which take place over the course of Wallace's writing career. While the publication and establishment of Wallace's fictional canon is 'essentially complete' (p. 162), Hering's study, in its sustained engagement with Wallace's archival materials, seems to invite the possibility for new ways to approach and make sense of Wallace's writing. Like Hayes-Brady, Hering does not attempt to position Wallace within the potentially limiting terms of 'post-postmodernism', 'postirony', or 'new sincerity'. Rather, both critics affirm Wallace's writing as essentially multi-faceted and contradictory, demanding a critical dialogue which, like the texts themselves, is necessarily incomplete in its attempts to make sense of the fragmentary complexity of this body of work.

Tim Gurowich

University of Sussex

¹ The International David Foster Wallace Society and *Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, <<https://www.dfwsociety.org/>>.

² Amy Hungerford, 'On Refusing to Read', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016 <<http://www.chronicle.com/article/On-Refusing-to-Read/237717/>> [accessed 9 January 2017].

³ Hungerford.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1980), 367. Hayes-Brady notes that Wallace 'explicitly invokes Rortian Philosophy' (p. 59) in reusing the title of Rorty's text for one of the stories in his 2004 collection *Oblivion*.

⁵ Samuel Beckett, 'Worstward Ho', in *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 81. This apparent contradiction is potentially inevitable in any discussion of the 'value' of artistic failure: Peter Boxall captures this paradox in a discussion of Beckett's own 'labours to conjure art out of the failure of art', suggesting that 'a logic which requires one to fail very soon returns failure to the success which it opposes' (Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 37).

⁶ See, for example, Rob Asghar, 'Why Silicon Valley's "Fail Fast" Mantra Is Just Hype', *Forbes*, 14 July 2014 <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/robasghar/2014/07/14/why-silicon-valleys-fail-fast-mantra-is-just-hype/>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁷ See, for example Lance Olsen, 'Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2 (1993), 199–215, Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), and Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: SSMG Press, 2010), pp. 131–46.

⁸ With some exceptions, most notably Mary Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁹ Hering situates his approach in relation to the field of 'genetic criticism'. Referring to the critic Frank Paul Bowman, Hering suggests that Wallace's archival papers allow the reader to plot the development of the 'foretext' of his work, what Bowman defines as the 'documentary mass . . . transcribed, selected, and arranged in such a way that it can be of use for criticism' (Frank Paul Bowman, 'Genetic Criticism', *Poetics Today*, 11.3 (Autumn 1990), 627–646 (p. 634)).

¹⁰ Hering defines Wallace's dialogism in terms of Bakhtin's notion of an epistemological mode whereby 'everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole', in which 'there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others' (Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 246).

¹¹ Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas', in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014), pp. 3–22 (p. 18).

¹² Beyond these parameters, Hering also briefly addresses 'Wallace's earliest published work of fiction' (p. 87), the 1984 story 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing'.

¹³ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 138.